



Florida Doctors Told to Submit Fingerprints

By: Sarah A. Klein AMNews Staff

Unnecessary, degrading, ineffective, wasteful – these are responses from doctors to a state law compelling them to send fingerprints to the health department by Jan. 1, 2000.

In an effort to catch physicians who have concealed a criminal background, the state of Florida has begun fingerprinting doctors and sending the results to the FBI's national database for analysis.

The state is hoping to find doctors who neglected to tell the state's Board of Medicine about their criminal past when applying for a medical license, as well as those who fail to inform the board of convictions after they were licensed.

Although advocates of the program conceded it may net few felons, they said the statewide effort is required to protect patients from a handful of people who are impersonating physicians as well as from doctors who have dangerous criminal backgrounds.

The state also is requiring chiropractors and podiatrists to submit prints.

Physicians who have received letters with instructions to report to police stations for fingerprinting before Jan. 1, 2000, said they are insulted and enraged by the program.

"I really find it quite distasteful," said Douglas Dedo, MD, a facial plastic surgeon from West Palm Beach. "I am going to have to do it or I am going to wind up going to jail and get fined, so obviously I will be fingerprinted, but it will be under protest."

Others called the program a degrading waste of money. If the government is looking for imposters practicing with no medical credentials whatsoever, a fingerprint won't be enough to stop them.

"The same way the impostor got through the fake credentialing, they are going to get through with fake fingerprinting," said Bradley Feuer, DO, a family physician and lawyer in Lake Worth. And if the government wants to check the background of a legitimate physician, a

name should suffice. Their credentialing is its own fingerprint and should establish his or her identity, he said.

Most state medical boards now rely on license applicants to disclose their criminal convictions, if any. A half-dozen actually check court records, said Dale Austin, deputy executive director of the Federation of State Medical Boards. Some look to state records; others turn to the FBI's national database. Florida is one of the first to use a fingerprint.

"I think [Florida's approach] will become more the norm," Austin said. "This is an area of increasing awareness and interest on the part of the boards."

A few bad apples

The interest most likely comes from a few highly publicized arrests of impostors who allegedly practiced medicine with forged credentials. One of the most startling was Dennis E. Roark. According to prosecutors, Roark managed to get licensed in Michigan, Ohio and Ontario, Canada, without ever attending medical school.

He was caught by a hospital credentialing staff that couldn't find his name listed in the AMA's Physician Masterfile, a database of the country's physicians.

Other non-physicians have been caught using assumed identities and de-grees to obtain licenses in different states.

In the early 1990's, the Florida Board of Medicine caught a man using the name of a dead physician when they began checking credentials. "When we verified his residency, the chairman said he was a good doctor, but he died last year," said Edward Dauer, MD, past chair of the state's Board of Medicine. "We invited that particular applicant in for a personal interview," and he was arrested on site, Dr. Dauer said.

Not many doctor-criminals to catch

Whether any of those alleged impostors would have been caught through a fingerprint check remains unknown. Not everyone in the country has been finger-

printed, making it hard for the government to establish someone's true identity. Those with a criminal or military history – or residents of states that fingerprint driver's license applicants – may make it into the government's database; a substantial number may not.

Regardless of how many Americans are in the fingerprint files, the new Florida program cast a very wide net to catch a small number of fish, according to Francesca Plendl, associate general counsel of the Florida Medical Assn. "The MD's are just not going to have a lot of convictions that the Board of Medicine doesn't already know about," she said.

Eduardo Palmer, a Miami lawyer who headed the health care fraud division for the Southern District of Florida, agreed.

In eight years, "I never saw an instance where a physician was engaged in past criminal activity that, had the government known about it, it wouldn't have issued him a license," Palmer said.

Still he wasn't ready to say the program was worthless until he sees what it might turn up.

The FSMB's Austin agreed. If fingerprinting caught one person who was concealing a dangerous past, it would be well worth it, he said.

On that point, some physicians concurred.

If the state would "show me the cases where people impersonated doctors and how this was going to help, then doctors would be all for it," said Stephen Babic, MD, a Boca Raton cardiologist.

Instead, Dr. Babic said, they are treating doctors as though they were criminals.

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